

A Prayer for the People Rebecca F. Harrison

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Parkway Presbyterian Church, Metairie, LA*

Scripture: Luke 11:1-13

Through the years of my ministry I have discovered that, in general, prayer is the most significant and, at the same time, the most under-used spiritual tool available to people of faith.

There are many reasons why this is so. One of those reasons is certainly pragmatic: It's often hard for us to discipline ourselves to have a regular, daily prayer time. That one, I'm afraid, I can't do much about beyond encouraging each of you to find a regular time in your already full schedules that you can give to God. You know where you can squeeze in ten or fifteen or thirty minutes; I suggest that, just like physical exercise, those minutes don't have to be consecutive.

There are, however, two aspects of prayer that I can help you with today, areas that are addressed in some fashion in our Gospel lesson for today. Those aspects are the language of prayer and the results, or lack thereof, that we get from praying.

The Gospel of Luke is the ideal place to start our discussion this morning, as it is the Gospel that most addresses Jesus' frequent practice of prayer. And that makes it logical for Luke to portray the disciples asking Jesus to teach them how to pray. They've seen him in prayer; they know he often goes away by himself to have a time and a place to converse with God; and they've probably heard his various teachings about prayer. It seems that it's something they might like to experience and understand for themselves.

As is often the case, what Jesus gave the disciples was probably not what they were expecting, when he responded to their request with what we now call the Lord's Prayer. And, as we will discover this morning, what we get when we pray is also probably not what we expect to receive.

But more about that later.

Let's first take some time to talk about the language we use when we pray.

We've all heard prayers full of flowery language and carefully crafted phrases, full of "thees" and "thous." And, frankly, some of us are intimidated by those prayers. That, of course, makes it difficult for us to pray, certainly in private, but especially on those public occasions where we're asked to offer a word of prayer. We think that the tools we have at our disposal are inadequate.

I read a story that illustrates this point, and at the same time sheds some light on the way we *ought* to pray—if, indeed, there is any "ought" involved. Supposedly, there was a conference in the Netherlands that was attended by dozens of prominent theologians and pastors. Even so, the conference host could find no one willing to offer a prayer before the evening dinner. Everyone who was asked declined, on the grounds that they were not adequately prepared to pray before

such an august audience. Finally, the host asked the most prominent person there, and he readily agreed. His prayer? “Lord, bless this food, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.”

What that should teach us is that it’s all right for our prayers to be simple and direct. Of course, what’s most important about prayer is that it happens at all. When Jesus taught his disciples to pray, what he wanted them to know was, as one commentator says, “Talking to God is like a family conversation where you express yourself unselfconsciously, with the confidence that you will be heard and understood” (*Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year C, After Pentecost 1. Abingdon Press, 1994, p. 103).

And nowhere is that tone of family conversation more evident than in Jesus’ form of address to God. He uses the Aramaic term of endearment, *Abba*, which loosely translates as papa or daddy. Why is that so important to us? It’s not, as some might argue, further proof that God is male. Gender isn’t even an issue here. What’s at stake is the intimacy of our relationship with God. Calling God *Abba* puts God here, with us, in our midst, sitting at the family dinner table with us, not off in some distant, otherworldly realm.

I have chosen this morning to preach this sermon at the Communion Table, rather than the pulpit, to help illustrate this sense of intimacy visually. In preparing this sermon, I realized that if I wanted to help you understand that God is not on high, but rather is close enough to touch, it would be more appropriate to preach on the physical level of the congregation, rather than “on high” in the pulpit. Perhaps, if you can sense the intimacy we have here, when we’re all essentially on one level, you will also sense the intimacy God wants to have with us, the intimacy that Jesus intended to communicate by his addressing God as *Abba*.

God wants us to feel that we’re a family, that God is our loving parent and we are cherished daughters and sons. There are probably some in the congregation this morning who have never experienced a truly loving mother or father. If you are one of those people, I invite you to let God be that loving parent for you. You know how much you desire that intimate relationship. Imagine what it would be like for you, and then let God fulfill your heart’s desire. Then you can enter into this prayer relationship with God, trusting God to care for you and to hold tenderly all that you bring in prayer, trusting that you will not be hurt or abandoned, as perhaps you have been by your human parents.

Let’s talk now about what it means for God to answer prayer. I have to tell you, the part of this passage referring to answered prayer has always been difficult for me. Jesus says, “Ask, and it will be given; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened” (v. 9). Why, then, is it so often the case that a loved one isn’t healed or a situation not rectified?

Well, obviously, Jesus means here that if we ask, etc., whatever we ask God for, within reason, of course, will be given us. But a prayer relationship doesn’t mean that, and quite frankly, Jesus doesn’t promise that. Oh, I know it seems that he does, but we need to take a closer look here. In regard to the asking, it’s pretty clear that we’re supposed to ask and ask and ask, until finally whatever it is we’re asking for is given to us. However—and this is a big one—it isn’t that we finally get what we’re asking for, necessarily. It’s rather that, as we keep asking, we develop that intimacy with God to such a level that we change what it is we ask for. Our heart’s desire

changes. Instead of asking for things or conditions for ourselves and others, we shift our focus, asking only that God's will be done. When we arrive at that level of intimacy, we realize that God's will is indeed done, through the Holy Spirit.

And it is the Holy Spirit that is given when we ask, and when we seek, and when we knock. Did you notice that? I hadn't, until I began to work on this sermon. It was only until I began to study the entire section of this part of Luke's Gospel that I finally understood the true gift that is given to each of us. There it is, at the very end of the passage. Listen again to those last couple of verses:

Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? (vs. 11-13)

When you think about it, this makes sense. In families, we get to know one another so well that we know what one person will do or not do, what one will say or not say. As children, we learn what our parents' limits are, and while we sometimes push them, we know deep down what will be their response to our asking for something. As we mature, the things we ask for change. And as adults in relationship with our adult parents, we have a new, mature relationship, one based on genuine love, trust, and respect. We no longer ask to stay up late, or to have the keys to the car, or for money. Instead, we inquire how the other is doing and what's happening in his or her life. We share fond memories, celebrate developments in each other's lives, and express concern when things are difficult. When we are apart from each other, we know what the other will say or do in any given situation and so, internally, carry that one with us in every aspect of our lives.

So it is with us and God, when we are in an intimate, mature prayer relationship. We no longer ask for things that are minor to God—health, prosperity, easing of difficult situations. Now we look to God's Holy Spirit to guide us through every aspect of life, even if subconsciously. We feel God's presence almost intuitively, because we have daily been so close to God that we've been able to develop this wonderful, mature, spiritual relationship with God.

My hope is that now each of you can see how the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, the one we traditionally call the Lord's Prayer, is indeed a prayer for the people—all the people. It serves to bring us into an intimate, loving, regular communication with God, and it brings us to that communication with a deeper level of maturity. As we pray this or any other prayer, we now sense God's loving presence with us, not only in prayer, but throughout every minute of every day.

May you experience God's presence, God's wisdom, God's loving, parental concern for you, each and every day. Amen.

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